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This Saturday night undisputed middleweight champion Bernard Hopkins (45-2-1 32 KOs) will defend his title against top contender Howard Eastman (40-1 34). Eastman was recently quoted saying he'll stop Hopkins in five rounds. It's probably safe to say Mr. Eastman is coming to fight. Hopkins-Eastman is just an appetizer for what will most likely be one of the biggest fights of 2005.

Fighting before Hopkins on the co-feature being televised by HBO is Jermain Taylor (22-0 16 KOs), who takes on Daniel Edouard (16-0-2 9 KOs). Taylor, the 2000 Olympic bronze medalist, is promoted by Lou DiBella, President of DiBella Entertainment (DBE). Before starting DiBella Entertainment, he was the vice-president of programming for HBO sports and the visionary behind HBO's "Boxing After Dark" series. DiBella also negotiated for Hopkins prior to Hopkins entering Don King's middleweight tournament, resulting in Hopkins earning a career high purse against Felix Trinidad. Hopkins won the tournament when he stopped Trinidad in what was, at the time, the signature fight of his career, becoming the undisputed middleweight champion in September 2001.

The Hopkins/DiBella relationship soured more than two years ago and ultimately ended up in court. In 2002 DiBella filed a defamation law suit against Hopkins after Hopkins claimed DiBella shook him down for $50,000. Hopkins alleged the money was so he could fight on HBO while DiBella was still the vice-president of programming for the network. The issue was resolved when the court ruled in DiBella's favor awarding him $610,000.

In the two plus years since Hopkins and DiBella terminated their relationship as business associates, both have realized tremendous success in boxing. Hopkins has defended his middleweight title five times since stopping Trinidad, and in his last fight he stopped Oscar De La Hoya in the ninth round earning him the biggest purse of his career. Hopkins can stretch his record of consecutive defenses of the middleweight title to 20 with a victory over Eastman, the most by any middleweight champion in boxing history. Making a 20th defense puts Hopkins in very exclusive company, joining Joe Louis (25 title defenses) light flyweight Ricardo Lopez (25 title defenses) and Larry Holmes (20 title defenses).

Since its inception back in May of 2000, DBE has signed many top amateur standouts and world-class fighters. On January 26 of this year, DiBella joined music and entertainment mogul Damon Dash to form Dash/DiBella promotions. The partnership of Dash/DiBella will work as a full service promotional company with an emphasis on promoting and marketing minority athletes. Former Olympian Andre Berto and undefeated New York City prospects Jaidon Codrington and Curtis Stevens were the first three fighters signed by Dash/DiBella promotions. But DiBella's biggest star is middleweight contender Jermain Taylor. Taylor is currently ranked among the top five middleweights in the world by all three of boxing's major sanctioning organizations. And many fight observers believe Taylor will rule the middleweight division after Hopkins.

With Bernard Hopkins and Jermain Taylor fighting on the same card, some of the longest running and most popular soap operas on television couldn't have scripted a more perfect scenario. Only a Hopkins loss to Eastman, or a Taylor loss to Edouard this Saturday night, can alter boxing's version of the perfect storm, resulting in Hopkins defending his title against Taylor. A Hopkins-Taylor showdown brings Hopkins and DiBella full circle, and some may even see it as Hopkins-DiBella II.

Think about the two irresistible forces and egos at play here. In one corner you have a man who was voted by every boxing and sports publication in publication as one of the most powerful and influential people in boxing, who also was a major decision maker at HBO sports. And to anyone who doubts HBO's clout pertaining to professional boxing, you really are a true boxing fan and watch nothing but the fights. HBO determines and dictates what fighters the boxing public gets to see - something that even the sanctioning bodies and most promoters have no control over. Remember, you could train or manage the greatest fighter in the world, but if he doesn't get some sort of television exposure he's not going to be around long . . . because he'll starve to death.

How many people do you think have confronted DiBella during the last decade? I'll bet it's a real short list. The opposite is probably closer to the truth. It would only make business sense to try and stay on the good side of the person who can provide access for your fighter to showcase his skills to the biggest audience possible. And that is not meant to suggest any wrongdoing by anyone. It’s simply a business formality.

I think it's more than safe to assume, in fact I know for a fact, that DiBella has a huge ego. How could he not and still be human? On top of that he was a confidante and advisor to Hopkins. It was just a few years ago that he felt he was pushed by Hopkins to file a defamation suit against him. Do you think Lou DiBella wouldn't just love being in the opposing corner the night Hopkins reign as middleweight champ ended? - Courtesy of the fighter whose career he navigated from the very beginning? He wouldn't be human if he didn't feel that way.

How about in the other corner? There's probably a Lou DiBella in every skyscraper in New York City, but Hopkins also has a massive ego. How many men have been called undisputed middleweight champion of the world in the last hundred years? Hopkins is not only a legitimate world champion, he's also defended the middleweight title more times successfully than any other fighter who has held the crown. Fighters named Fitzsimmons, Ketchel, Greb, Robinson, Monzon and Hagler didn't hold the title as long or defend it as many times as Bernard Hopkins. I haven't the slightest doubt in the world that Hopkins would relish giving DiBella a beating through Jermain Taylor. And he probably couldn't dream of a better way to retire from boxing.

Hopkins-Taylor is a mega fight without the added Hopkins/DiBella soap opera. Hopkins is a middleweight for the ages, and what's not to like about Jermain Taylor as a fighter? Both fighters bring a lot to the ring in terms of skill and ability.

Hopkins is at his best fighting as a counterpuncher when his opponent goes to him. He is, however, a rare fighter in that he can also be effective pushing the fight and fighting inside. He has shown he can adapt to any style and usually doesn't allow his opponents to fight their fight.

He also has a concrete chin, knows every trick in the book, and has won championship fights boxing his opponents and brawling with them. Taylor is a boxer-puncher and understands the importance of a good jab. He uses his jab to set up his combinations and to dictate the tempo and terms of the fight. Taylor also throws a very powerful right uppercut on the inside and is very strong physically. It's easy to see why he is viewed as the future of the middleweight division.

In his last fight two months ago, Taylor won a lopsided decision over former champ William Joppy, who was only a shell of the fighter that handed Howard Eastman his only loss back in November of 2001. Immediately after Taylor beat Joppy, DiBella said in no uncertain terms that Jermain is ready to fight any middleweight in the world, including Felix Trinidad and Bernard Hopkins.

And Hopkins hasn't been shy about mentioning Taylor. In the media Hopkins has been critical of Taylor's fights and has gone out of his way to point out mistakes he said he has seen Taylor make. And when this was pointed out to Taylor at the press conference announcing his fight with Edouard as the co-feature to the Hopkins-Eastman world title fight, Taylor fired back that he “would stand ringside for Hopkins’ fight and yell out any mistakes Hopkins is making. I'm going to be right there beside the ring. I want to see what he does and every mistake he makes."

There’s no need to guess why Taylor is fighting beneath the Hopkins-Eastman bout.

His trainer Patrick Burns and promoter Lou DiBella think the time is right and Taylor can end Hopkins ten year reign as middleweight champ. They know having Taylor and Hopkins fight back to back on the same card will draw comparisons between them and stimulate the fight. Not to mention HBO starting the Hopkins-Taylor drumbeat to kickoff their broadcast. I can see it now: Jim Lampley projecting how a Hopkins-Taylor fight would be the passing of the torch regarding middleweight supremacy from one generation to another.

Hopkins has every reason in the world to want to punish Taylor. Taylor is a former Olympian and has had the benefit of million dollar marketing and promotion companies overseeing his entire career, along with having shrewd businessmen providing him the access to fight in front of millions of people on a major cable television network . . . something Hopkins didn't realize until he was middleweight champion for three or four years.

Hopkins is in a “can't lose” situation. By the time he and Taylor fight he'll be almost 41-years-old. If he lost a close fight against Taylor after a 10-year reign as middleweight champ and after having made 20 consecutive title defenses, it won't effect his historical standing a bit. Only his pride would be hurt. But he may earn the biggest purse of his career against Taylor, which will help some. And if he beats Taylor, something he may be favored to do, he's also beating DiBella, which will make the taste of victory that much sweeter.

Hopkins hasn't forgotten about $610,000 from the lawsuit DiBella won against him. I'll bet there isn't anything Hopkins would love to do more than give DiBella's superstar, Jermain Taylor, a beating in the ring - while DiBella sits ringside watching the fight – a beating which Taylor

carries with him for the rest of his days.

DiBella, being politically correct, said it best at the January 13 press conference: "It's the present and the future of the middleweight division. Jermain has to be thrilled to fight underneath Hopkins, who is a future first ballot Hall of Famer."

A first ballot Hall of Famer that DiBella and Taylor hope Mother Nature and Father Time may have trapped against the ropes.